

What Explains Morality in College Students?

Mary E. Ward & Cheryl A. Fortner-Wood, Ph.D.
Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that many variables can influence decision-making, including family cohesion and personality beliefs (Erdly & Dweck, 1993; White, Howie, & Perz, 2000). The purpose of the current study was to investigate sources of influence on moral judgment particularly, whether or not beliefs about personality influence moral decision making. Participants were 107 young adults, with a mean age of 19.48 ($SD = 2.30$). Beliefs about personality were assessed using the 'Implicit Personality Theory Questionnaire' (Erdly & Dweck, 1993). A lower score indicated incremental beliefs and a higher score indicated entity beliefs. "Incremental" reflects the belief that personality changes depending on the situation, whereas "entity" reflects a person's beliefs that personality is unchanging. We used the Defining Issues Test (DIT-2; Rest, 1999) to assess moral decision making. We expected entity theorists (participants) would have higher DIT-2 scores than incremental theorists, but found the opposite. We also found ethnic, but not gender, differences in DIT-2 scores.

Hypothesis

Our primary hypothesis was that DIT-2 scores would be different for incremental and entity theorists. In particular, we predicted that participants categorized as entity theorists would have a higher morality score than incremental theorists. Incremental theorists, people who believe personality changes, will score lower on the Defining Issues Test (DIT) than Entity theorists, showing that Entity theorists are more moral.

Measures

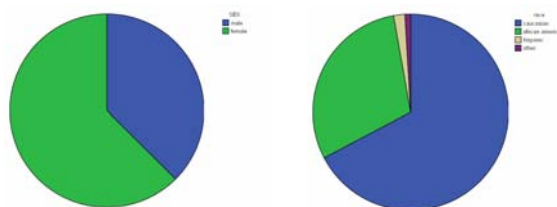
•Each participant completed a three part survey. The first part was the Implicit Personality Theory Questionnaire (Erdly & Dweck, 1993), which consisted of three questions designed to assess individuals' beliefs about personality. For example, participants rated their agreement with the statement, "A person can do things to get people to like them but they can't change their real personality." We calculated a 'Personality Theory' for each participant by totaling the 3 questions relating to personality theory. The score could range from 3 to 15, with a lower score indicating incremental beliefs and a higher score indicating entity beliefs.

•The next section of the survey asked for demographic information, such as age, race, and political affiliation. It also included NSSE-esque engagement questions. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) assesses the extent to which students engage in good practices at an institution. Our questions focused on specific behaviors during that particular semester. The results of the Sept 2005 NSSE concluded that Winthrop University first year students excel in areas such as 1) participating in community based projects in or outside of class and 2) communicating with students from different economic, social and racial backgrounds. We altered these questions and used them in our survey. We asked (Do you volunteer?) and (This semester how often have you had a serious conversation with someone from a different culture, ethnicity, religion, or value system); these questions were on a likert scale.

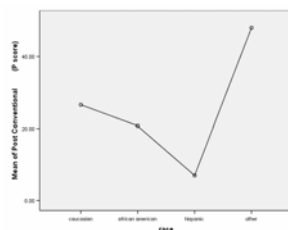
•The final section of the survey consisted of the Defining Issues Test (Revised) DIT-2 (Rest, 1999). Created by James Rest in 1978, the Defining Issues Test is a self-administered objective measure of moral reasoning based on Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Subjects are presented with dilemmas and asked to select their answers on a multiple choice basis. The DIT-2 is a revised version of the test with shorter dilemmas and clearer instructions. The moral decision making score is A.K.A. the postconventional or P-score. The DIT-2 responses were scored at the Center for the Study of Ethical Development.



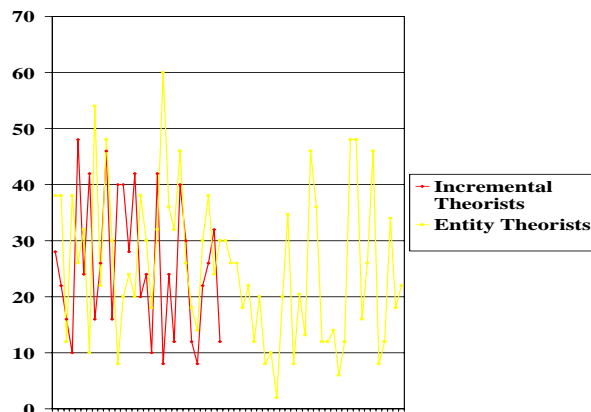
Gender and Ethnicity



Moral Decision-Making Scores By Ethnicity



Distribution of Moral Decision-Making Scores



Recruitment

First, the principle investigator invited students in randomly selected sections of a general education course that all first-time first year students at the institution take. In order to increase sample size, recruitment expanded to other courses in the General Education Curriculum (e.g. PSYC 101).

Participants

•Participants were 39 males and 66 females college students from a mid-sized, public university. The mean age was 19.48 ($SD = 2.30$). The sample is fairly representative of the institution in terms of gender and ethnicity. 70 participants self-identified as Caucasian, 30 as African American, 2 as Hispanic, and 1 as "Other."

Results

- Beliefs about personality, ethnicity, and age explained variability in the morality scores.
- Contrary to our expectations, Pearson correlations revealed that entity theorists (people who think personality is stable) score lower on moral decision making than incremental theorists (people who think personality is malleable), $r = -.18$, $p = .037$. However, 65% of participants were categorized as entity theorists (using a median split where participants who scored the median, 7, were removed from the analyses).
- Although, there were no ethnic differences in personality beliefs, there were ethnic differences in moral decision making [$F(3, 100) = 3.833$, $p = .012$]. The scores of Caucasians were 5.8 points higher than those of African Americans in the sample.
- Reports of being spiritual, moral, volunteering, and having a conversation with someone of a different culture, ethnicity or religion were unrelated to their DIT-2 score. Likewise self-esteem was unrelated to DIT-2 scores.
- There were also no gender differences in morality scores despite the fact that one-way ANOVA found gender differences in personality beliefs [$F(1, 97) = 8.177$, $p = .005$].

Discussion

- We hypothesized that there would be a difference in DIT-2 scores between incremental and entity theorists. In particular, we predicted that participants categorized as entity theorists would have a higher DIT-2 score than an implicit theorist. This hypothesis was not supported. In fact, we found the opposite. Participants who think personality stays the same have lower moral decision making scores than participants who believe personality changes. One possible explanation for this is that entity theorists may use this to justify their behavior. For example: "I am always late to class, that is just how I am."
- The ethnic difference in DIT-2 scores with this sample is puzzling given the lack of such a finding in previous research (Buttelt, 1999; Wilson, 1995). Of course, any interpretation must recognize that this finding is based on unequal group sizes with 67% of the sample being Caucasian.
- It is also interesting that what participants thought about their own spirituality was unrelated to their performance on the measure of moral thinking. The stereotypical belief that religiosity is correlated with morality is not supported here. Although spirituality may encourage morality in some aspects, this finding suggests that morality may be a choice separate from spirituality. This also suggests that morality is more universal than spirituality.